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U.S. Kept Mum on Soviet Sub Patrol

U.S. intelligence agencies often keep secrets from the American public that are well known to the men in the Kremlin. Sometimes the secrets leak out in a matter of days — and sometimes not for years.

Here's a shocker that the intelligence experts have sat on for five years: In 1975, a Soviet Y-class missile-carrying submarine came within 300 miles of the Carolina coast. Its 16 nuclear missiles could have hit targets 1,500 miles inland — a range that includes our Strategic Air Command headquarters as well as major population centers throughout the eastern half of the country.

It was an unprecedented "patrol" for a Soviet missile sub, apparently intended to test the U.S. response. As the top-secret National Intelligence Daily pointed out in its June 6, 1975, issue, the Y-class Soviet submarine had come 900 miles closer to the East Coast than such subs normally did.

Although intelligence analysts called the mission "unprecedented," and said it represented a "dramatic change" in Soviet patrol patterns, they made no public announcement of the incident. In a later, lengthy analysis, the experts explained the ominous conclusions to be drawn from the provocative patrol:

"Because the warning time for missiles launched from a submarine at such a close-in location would be very short, some U.S. targets — such as strategic bombers — would become quite vulnerable unless relocated far-

ther inland or maintained at a higher state of readiness."

Here are the facts of the June 1975 incident, according to a still secret report: "A Y-class, nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine and a V-class, nuclear-powered attack boat made a coordinated patrol about 350 miles off the East Coast of the U.S. — the closest a modern Soviet ballistic-missile submarine had ever been. Y-class submarines normally patrol about 900 to 1,200 miles farther out to sea." The submarines moved down the coast from the Cape Cod area to within 300 miles of North Carolina before pulling back.

The analysts decided that the probable purpose of the close-in patrol was "to provoke a reaction by U.S. anti-submarine forces." Beyond careful monitoring of the Soviet probe, however, there was no U.S. response.

Evidently emboldened by their June mission, the Soviets later sent a V-class attack sub, which is armed with torpedoes, not missiles, to within 120 miles of Cape Hatteras, N.C., where it patrolled for nearly a week. Previously the sub had come no closer than 300 miles off the coast.

The intelligence experts learned some encouraging things about the Soviet Navy's underwater capability during their monitoring of the 10-day June patrol. The Russian sub had "numerous communications failures [and] problems with passive sonars." The missile-carrying sub "emitted oc-

casional noises" that were easily detected by the U.S. watchers.

"The combination of equipment failures and breaches in operational security would seem to call into question Soviet standards of maintenance and training," the analysts concluded. "Assuming the Soviet Navy would send only first-line submarines and crews on such a patrol, the Soviets' standards appear lower than those of first-line U.S. submarines."

In July 1976, the Air Force began beefing up its B52 patrols over the Atlantic, to keep track of "widening Soviet naval operations," it was announced at the time.

Soviet missile subs still "kind of come and go," a CIA spokesman informed my reporters Dale Van Atta and Dave Carpenter, "for a [U.S.] missile firing they want to monitor or something."